
RICHARD M WEAVER

*The American as a
Regenerate Being*

(Edited by George Core and M. E. Bradford)

RUNNING CONTINUOUSLY THROUGH American literature, from the records set down by early settlers to the immensely more sophisticated writings of our present day, is one insistent question, variously conceived and variously answered, which may be phrased in succinct form thus: is the American a regenerate being? Regenerate means, of course, in its etymological and theological sense, born again or made new. Whether the question comes to us in a naïve form, or in a form circumspective and knowing, the problem it poses is essentially this: we know that the American is a man in a new world, but is he also a new man?

From the bare outline of our history we can say that "America is vestering." American has somehow always meant going west. From the time when Columbus guided his caravels towards the West Indies to the

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present hour when thousands pour monthly into California, there has continued this huge Western trek, away from Europe, then away from the "effete East," towards regions vaster and somehow more promising. But beyond and above this simple physical migration there has occurred, in the opinions of many, a kind of spiritual migration, in the course of which the migrants transported themselves not merely from the British Isles and from Europe but also from one moral condition to another. Under this conception the new arrival to these shores was not merely a transported man, he was also a transformed man, who had entered into a new status, for which the term "regenerate" might hopefully be right.

As reasons for leaving Europe behind him, the departing voyager had not simply complaints of poverty, or lack of opportunity, or of oppression, he had also a moral case. Europe was a failure when measured by the practicable ideal of what might be, and America was the place where that ideal might be realized. Not even the rich and marvellous cultures of Europe were atonement for what she had become; they were undeniably admirable as forms, but they were restrictive upon something yet more precious: human dignity and freedom. Hence, in seeking a place that would make him free, the American was seeking at the same time to raise himself up to an ideal which is paramount because it takes cognizance of individual worth despite the weight and prestige of institutions which have long histories to consecrate them.

In Europe there is much of beauty but little of love; in America there is little of beauty, but much of love, George Santayana has said in one of his famous aphorisms. And this contains a key to the difference. Europe has produced much that gratifies the aesthetic and intellectual sensibility; yet something has been left lacking. There has not been that affinity between man and man which religious thought places even above the claims of beauty.

I do not suggest that so neat a premise was in the conscious mind of every newcomer when he disembarked. But in the form of latent premise, it guided the impulse of very many of the new arrivals. Even those who came with the crudest thoughts of gain had the feeling that something was not right back home; supposing rightly or wrongly that they had been deprived, they looked for redress in the New World, or

at least for kinder treatment from others. As for those who came for religious and political reasons, the case is too clear to need stating: America was to be the New Canaan where they could establish a society under better sanctions than had been possible in the land of their origin.

The thesis of superior American purity owes a great deal, obviously, to our Pilgrim ancestors. Separatists in more than one sense of the term, they withdrew physically from Europe to set up their theocracy in New England. Later, however, this same feeling of moral superiority made appearance in our social and political writing. Thomas Jefferson was the strongest of all advocates of keeping America free from what he conceived to be European contamination. He would have prevented young Americans from going to Europe for their educations because he felt that on balance they brought back more evil than good. It is interesting to see his reasoning upon this subject.

But why send an American youth to Europe for an education? . . . If he goes to England, he learns drinking, horse-racing, and boxing. These are the peculiarities of English education. The following circumstances are common to education in that and the other countries of Europe. He acquires a fondness for European luxury and dissipation, and a contempt for the simplicity of his own country . . . he returns to his own country a foreigner.

After our country had achieved its independence and had gained a degree of national self-confidence, the theme was continued quite as loudly as before, if with emphasis on other things. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century there was a strong and well-articulated tendency to look upon the American as the "new Adam"—as a man in position to begin history afresh, without any debt to a sinful past. It would be surprising to some present-day Americans to learn how many acknowledged leaders of that period were "America Firsters" in the matter of our national culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson, delivering his "American Scholar" address, called upon his audience to cease to attend to the courtly Muses of Europe. Henry David Thoreau wrote: "I look upon England today as an old gentleman who is travelling with a great deal of baggage, trumpery which he has accumulated from long house-keeping, which he has not the courage to burn." Even the sober-minded Hawthorne chimes in, in the same tune. "The time will come, sooner

or later," he said to W. D. Ticknor, "when John Bull will look to us for his salvation." Later he discovers a lack of sympathy with the French: "Their eyes do not win me, nor do their glances melt and mingle with mine." Noah Webster was announcing that "American glory begins at the dawn." Daniel Webster addressed himself to the theme in the Bunker Hill oration:

Her obligations to Europe for science and art, laws, literature and manners, America acknowledges as she ought, with respect and gratitude. . . But America has not failed to make returns. . . America exercises influences, or holds out examples, for the consideration of the Old World, of a much higher, because they are of a moral and political character.*

Edward Everett summed up his prescription in one phrase: the health of America required *separation from Europe*. The *Democratic Review* affirmed that "our national birth was the beginning of a new history . . . which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only." And further: "The expansive future is our arena. We are entering on its untrodden ways . . . with a clear conscience unsullied by the past." James Russell Lowell aimed a diatribe at imitative writing by Americans and at the same time affirmed a belief in the native superiority of the American.

Forget Europe wholly, your veins throb with blood
To which the dull current in hers is but mud.

Somewhat later, Walt Whitman was to declare that "the priest departs, the divine literatus appears," meaning of course that religion with its long history and its traditions was about to leave the stage, and that in its place were to come creators of literature divinely inspired with messages of democracy and the future.

As R. W. B. Lewis has observed in his *The American Adam*, the image of this new Adam was practically an ethical polemic. It was the American retort against Europe, with its past of narrowness and oppression and political unrighteousness. The new Adam as celebrated here was not just regenerate man: he was man who had never known a fall.

* The last sentence of the quotation is as Webster wrote it.—Editors.

Orators and poets and men known as philosophers thus indulged in an apotheosis of the American.

Some of these pronouncements have about them, indeed, the blattancy of political chauvinism; others are more perceptive of real truths. What I am stressing at the moment is the persistence of the idea upon different levels, the insistency of a feeling that in America something new had emerged. And now if we turn to a later generation of writers, men who have nothing about them sounding of rodomontade, we still encounter the sense of an American difference.

D. H. Lawrence was an unmannerly critic of American literature, but, as is apt to be true of one who has no need to apologize and no desire to ingratiate, he made some very penetrating judgments. Lawrence emphasized the thought that the American has a special kind of consciousness. This he attributed in part to the polarity of place—the American characteristically is the Westerner in his wide-open West. I do not think nearly enough has been said in cultural history about the effect of place upon a people's way of looking at things and of ordering their values. This does not mean that an Eskimo will have one kind of outlook by virtue of being above the Arctic Circle and a Congolese another in any easy and predictable way. It is not a doctrine of simple environmental determinism. Yet it does mean that place will enter in some formative way into the cultural constitution. To be in or of a place is a part of one's definition. Cosmopolitanism is a kind of privation. But only the artist or the philosophical critic is equipped to say how this being of a place moulds one. That is a task for insight. It is enough to note here that Lawrence, certainly no man to fall for easy or second-hand ideas, took stock in this proposition.

However, historical and other factors also enter into one's formation, and here again Lawrence has some interesting views. After the Renaissance, he says, Europe took the road into a liberal *cul de sac*. Not all Europeans found this path attractive, and those who were moved by ideological or spiritual reasons to make a change decided to go to America and abandon the old European consciousness entirely. They wanted neither its traditional order and rule nor the kinds of chaos and breakdown certain to result from post-Renaissance liberalism. A very specu-

lative kind of diagnosis, one might say, and yet because of its coherence with some recognizable facts, one not to be ignored. What did these emigrants want, who were rejecting both the old and the new in Europe?

They wanted some new relationship with the world which would bring with it a positive gain in freedom. At the basis of the American consciousness, he says, lies a dictum: "Thou shalt not presume to be a master." This is what the American declares to all other Americans and to outsiders as well. "Thou shalt not presume to be a master." This does not mean, "Thou shalt not be a master." The key word is "presume." It announces that you shall not conceive in advance, without any ground or evidence, that you are entitled to mastership. Here appears the radical break with Europe. For there was in the old European tradition much of presumption, the feeling that certain men or orders were aboriginally destined to be lords of others.

In this regard, however, an important distinction is to be made. The American attitude is not to be taken simply as an attack upon aristocracy or upon the idea of superiority or upon any hierarchical ordering of society. It is an attack upon presumption, upon the claim without the deed, the aristocratic pretense without aristocratic fulfillment. What the American says in essence is, prove your title. Nor can this be regarded as a posture of simple pragmatism. It is rather a recognition of the principle that status cannot survive without function.

All existence wears the two great aspects of permanence and change. It is as idle to say that nothing ever changes as to deny that anything has a fixed nature. Without permanence there is no possibility of knowledge; without change there is no possibility of life. This broad truth is applicable also to society. Status there has to be; without some granting of rights, privileges, and conditions, it is not possible to conceive an orderly society. But unless society insists upon function or performance at some point as justification of these, it lapses into a caste system, and a caste system is by definition out of contact with reality.

It has been the distinctive American achievement to bring these together into a new balance—to affirm function while at the same time preserving status. But since for us Europe has generally stood for an over-balance of status—a too great reliance upon establishment—in our

behavior and our culture we have more often expressed our faith in function as the wholesome corrective. It is the deed as opposed to the prerogative, the active man as opposed to the man invested with some aura or some reputation which has been our redress of the balance. If there is one accent heavier than others in American culture and literature, it is upon the redemptive virtue of this aspect of existence.

In many cases we have carried this too far; in some instances we have made it a shibboleth. But I feel right in saying that where the American is dramatized vis-a-vis the European or European type, we find stressed this justification by action, which carries with it a certain cleanness, as opposed to the encrustations of any kind of settlement—even of civilization as this has been known.

The air of it was detected in the confident look and the free ways of our pioneers. And we encounter it in the literary depictions of our most creative artists—Mark Twain and Whitman and Henry James. Huckleberry Finn, that extraordinary intuition of what is most American in the American, is a kind of super-separatist. He flees from the world of civilization as represented by the Widow Douglas and the various respectabilities of village life. He embarks on that drifting voyage down the Mississippi, which not only keeps him separated or emancipated from the shore, but also keeps him on a moving medium, which can be taken symbolically as a means of escape from an imprisoning past. When Huck declares at the end of the book, "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before," he is speaking the characteristic note of the American regenerate. I was sunk in civilization. Now I am redeemed. I shall not fall again. Twain returns to the theme in *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*, where he tilts his own kind of lance against the whole institution of chivalry. Since chivalry was probably the most remarkable formal development of European culture, it was for Twain the most logical target for attack from his premises, even if we must deplore some inadequate comprehension of it.

The distrust of Europe and its civilization is somewhat harder to document from Whitman. Whitman was not a good hater. That expan-

sive, all-inclusive outlook of his inclined him to extend hospitality toward everything. Even the Old World, he admitted now and then, had to be counted in somehow. Yet on balance his note is clearly that of American regenerateness. And nowhere is it more finely expressed than in that fine line of "Starting from Paumanok": "Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World." Here is the regenerate American with all of Whitman's cheerful confidence.

A stanza from "Song of Exposition," written ten years later, gives a fuller inventory of his feeling, especially on the subject of American cultural destiny.

Come, Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia;
 Cross out, please, those immensely overpaid accounts;
 That matter of Troy, and Achilles' wrath, and Eneas',
 Odysseus' wanderings;
 Placard "*Removed*" and "*To Let*" on the rocks of your snowy
 Parnassus;
 Repeat at Jerusalem—place the notice high on Jaffa's gate,
 and on Mount Moriah;
 The same on the walls of your Gothic European Cathedrals,
 and German, French and Spanish Castles;
 For know a better, fresher, busier sphere—a wide, untried
 domain awaits, demands you.

Two men more unlike in temperament and artistic method than Whitman and Henry James it would be difficult to imagine—though James once confessed, with a consciousness of anomaly, that Whitman was his favorite poet. Still, one finds in James in a singular way the American emerging as an approvable type. James handled the problem, of course, in his own subtle and probing style, yet the upshot is not very different. He himself had felt the powerful pull which the more aesthetic civilization of Europe is likely to exert upon an American of sensibility. The general pattern of plot in more than one of his stories is for an American protagonist to go to Europe seeking those sources of satisfaction which the older civilization has to offer. There he comes up against intrigue, dissimulation, and duplicity which put his innocence to a severe trial. But somehow, in most cases, the American emerges in a superior light. In his novel entitled *The American*, to take a significant instance, Christopher Newman, who has been treated haughtily and shabbily by the

aristocratic Bellegarde family, finally has it in his power to retaliate. But instead of retaliating, instead of descending to the level of their ways, he simply destroys that which had given him the opportunity for revenge. He turns away from the whole affair in an apparent conclusion that this is not the kind of thing for him. It is a peculiarly American magnanimity.

In one of his best, though regrettably one of his least known novels, *The Bostonians*, there is a kind of a fortiori demonstration of this same difference. Here, interestingly enough, the setting is in his own country, but the clash of forces is basically the same. In this instance a young Mississippian, very solid, normal, and candid, whom business has brought to Boston, falls in with Boston intellectuals and blue-stockings. Basil Ransom, the Mississippian, keeps his aplomb; and the Bostonians are exhibited with varying degrees of caricature. The point is made plain in the course of the novel that their sophisticated intellectual culture has somehow spoiled them or got them off balance; it has drawn them away from that standard of sanity and directness which is represented by Ransom. Here the conflict is not the American against the European, but the American of a traditional type against people in that section of America most oriented towards Europe. And while James would never dream of speaking of his hero in this novel as "wholesome," that is the aspect under which he enters and leaves, and this was one reason for the poor reception of the novel in Boston.

The identical polarity appears in the finest work of the figure with which I shall conclude this group, *The Great Gatsby*, of F. Scott Fitzgerald. This is a peculiarly affecting account of innocence in contact with an older, more sophisticated, and guilty kind of culture. Jay Gatsby is a Westerner in fact—from North Dakota, a part of the West with something of the frontier then remaining. Caught up in the wave of the First World War, he goes to an officers' training camp near Louisville, and there he meets Daisy Fay. Daisy is the only girl of wealth and social position he has ever known, and it is easy to see the extraordinary glamor which she held for him. They have a brief romance, but of course Daisy is not for Jay Gatsby. She soon marries Tom Buchanan, a fabulously rich Chicago heir, and they go off to live in luxury on Long

Island. Still, Gatsby is like Petrarch having seen his Laura: he can never forget her or put her out of mind. After the war he becomes the head of a vast bootlegging enterprise and makes money in such amounts that he is able to become a neighbor of Daisy's on Long Island and to continue his worship from much nearer. In a distant sort of way they resume their affair, but the result of the new contact is to bring out the essential devotion, manliness, and idealism of Gatsby, so poor in his background and education, and the essential selfishness, callousness, and even corruption of Daisy and Tom and their group. Like rich and indulgent people of their kind, they make a mess and leave it for others to clean up—that is the judgment of the book. Gatsby has made his money in illicit traffic, but they are rotten compared with him. There can be no doubt that Fitzgerald is expressing in fictional form this archetypal idea: that when the honest, straightforward, and well-meaning West goes to the East, it finds itself in a different kind of moral atmosphere. This is not the innocence of the Garden any longer: it is something older and somehow depraved. What had been enacted in the America-Europe relationship can thus be acted out in the West-East relationship in America, and certainly Jay Gatsby is the one we would choose to call the American.

Interestingly enough, Fitzgerald made a pronouncement which shows that he had reflected upon this profound difference. He said: "France was a land, England was a people but America, having still about it that quality of an idea, was harder to utter." How quickly and truly that dissipates the notion that America has been merely the most successful real estate venture in history. Having about it the quality of an idea, it is hard to utter. But that is our next task, if we are to determine in what way the American is a new man.

The American *is* a regenerate being in the sense that "being an American is a moral condition."

The American is unregenerate in the sense that, like all other men, he has been born into history and lives in history. He has to work out "the awful experiment of time."

The question *has* to be answered both ways.

But on the other hand he is a man redeemed when you discover

him showing a certain mercy of equality to those around him and keeping faith with his lofty yet sometimes vague aspirations.

Probably no other people has ever been able to bring together these modes so successfully. The American has done it by preserving a certain tension between his idealistic outlook and an unrivalled ability to come to grips with facts and master them to his advantage.

The tension that I speak of is writ large in our history. Let us think of the realistic or seamy side first. We came as settlers or invaders (mostly with good intentions) and took the land away from the original inhabitants. This process went on for 300 years, and involved just about every species of fraud and force. Beginning in 1619 we started importing African blacks and kept on until we had many millions of them working in the status of slaves. I say "we" because it is sometimes overlooked that those who transported this property to our country were chiefly New Englanders. The violent upheaval which put an end to the institution of slavery was the greatest war of the nineteenth century, excepting only the Napoleonic wars. A rough and ready kind of settlement, with many incidental injustices. Following this crisis came the "Great Barbecue," a hectic era of great fortune building, during which the agricultural West and South unquestionably got exploited, and partly through political means. Then quite unabashedly we indulged in a few bouts of imperialism and seized some parts of the moribund Spanish Empire. After the First World War we went through a boom-and-bust period of financial expansion and afterward picked ourselves up by methods that are still controversial. But we came to the Second World War strong enough, physically and morally, to assure victory on the side that represented free government.

I have tried to make this an unadorned tale, a kind of pragmatic view of the history of the American people, a *res gestae* or chronicle of things done one way and another. It is the sort of story that could be cited by our critics and enemies as proof of our aimlessness and immorality. It is in fact cited by some who think that the United States needs nothing so much as to live down its past.

Yet it would be a very prejudiced and tendentious commentator who would limit himself to this side. The other side, of aspiration and

ennobling ideals and of native kindliness, has always been there to establish what I am calling the tension.

From the time of the Mayflower Compact there has been an orchestration of hopes, and again it would be a prejudiced historian who could not see that these have in fact exerted an upward pull upon the course of our activities. There is the pervasive idealism of Jefferson, from which we derive so many of our avowed (if not always invoked) political sanctions. "The principles of Jefferson are the maxims of a free society," Abraham Lincoln was to say. There is something in Jefferson's practicality about all kinds of physical devices and arrangements combined with a kind of visionariness which places him close to the generic American type—closer even than Franklin, who is sometimes thought of as the Aeneas of our tribe.

Right in the midst of the busy Yankees appeared the tracts of the New England Transcendentalists. No more eloquent sermons against materialism have ever been preached. Thoreau scorned the thought of possessions with a completeness which in another age might have established him as a saint. I am rich in proportion to the things I can do without was his constant theme. The philosophy of the entire group is distinctly otherworldly; it is precisely the kind of thing one would not expect to appear in America if one accepted the pragmatic picture—that is, the picture which reduces America to materialist self-seeking.

In the Civil War period Lincoln stands out as a striking embodiment of this tension of opposites. He was and always remained a politician, but he saw politics in the wider frame of morality. He was never an Abolitionist, and our "civil rights" advocates today will find very cold comfort in some of his utterances, yet he had his own position against the "peculiar institution." It was an accommodation to facts and an allegiance to principle at the same time. In the best of his speeches he showed a remarkable power to transcend immediate issues, however much they were working upon popular passions. Recall for a moment the Gettysburg Address. It is almost impossible to tell, from *internal* evidence, which side on the battlefield he is speaking for. Nearly all of the predicates can be applied to both sides. The most earthy of our

presidents in his origin, he proved capable of the most sublimated thinking.

Descending to later times, we encounter another representative in Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt always seemed fascinated by the European idea of *Realpolitik*, of which indeed he made some use. But in this he always appears on the defensive. It is not an American mode; it did not sit on him well. He was at his most natural when he was "doing good" in those "man-of-action" poses which he liked to adopt.

Every epoch, Herder says, has its own relationship to the divine or the transcendent. If America is an epoch, why is this not true of her, and why should we not be loyal to that relationship? These are questions which get no answers from positivists and relativists, for the first will not recognize an ontological basis for values, and the second looks upon neither general truth nor tradition as weighing anything in a balance with the urgency of the moment. People who persist in denying the image of America are mostly found in these groups. We cannot depend on them to defend anything for us, because their views are too superficial to reach what is most valuable in our eyes.

The predicate "regenerate," to which this lecture has been keyed must of course be taken considerately and not too literally. What I feel justified in concluding is that the American is a new type, made new by the quality of his experience. What that experience has been the average man feels in his bones; but as I have endeavored to point out, our literary artists, who to the extent that they are artists speak the truth disinterestedly, have articulated it sometimes in rather subtle ways. And it seems to me that it is a complex thing, which has defied and will go on defying and resisting those "terrible simplifications" with which Europe has been experimenting for half a century. Communism, Fascism, Naziism, and other forms of totalitarianism are in fact ruthless simplifications, forced upon peoples who had lost their sense of direction or their moral health. We have shown high immunity to them through the very novelty of our attitude born out of that fructifying union of materialism and idealism. Much of our political genius has lain in saying "No" to propositions which would lead to uniformity and rigidity. Even the doctrines of Rousseau, the historian John Fiske

noted, "found few readers and fewer admirers among the Americans." In the Old World from which we descend, the attractions of theory have been enough to produce many unbalanced and dangerous situations.

Not long ago I heard an American university president who was just back from Europe, where he had talked with scholars and intellectuals, say that to his surprise he had found the Europeans not at all interested in or impressed by American technological achievements. Their attitude was that we were here before you in this field, and we are just as capable in it today as you are, if not more so. What we want to hear about are the ideas that control your life. These are the unique American contributions. In my opinion, they were reading America right. What Europe can learn from America is not how to make a machine, but how to conceive values at once realistic and elevating, around which people will unite without coercion. We have not always done this, but characteristically we have sought to do it. And to the extent that this comprises the American's character, he has attained a new level, which can be described, without too much risk in the metaphor contained in the word, as a regeneration.